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ABSTRACT

This document explains an intergenerational literacy project, established by the Kenan Trust in 1988, in which more than 300 adults and children have participated at 7 pilot sites in North Carolina and Kentucky and for which an additional 22 sites in 11 states are planned. The first section relates one participant's experience with the project. Section 2 describes the project's model that focuses on family as the critical context in which learning is either stimulated or stifled. (With this model, undereducated parents and their preschool children go to school together: the parent for adult literacy and prevocational training, the child for early childhood development classes, and both together for classes on how to create in the home an atmosphere that supports learning). A rationale for the current attention focused on literacy development is followed by discussion of the necessity of an integrated program designed to meet all of the varied but interrelated needs of the disadvantaged family. A typical day for project participants and the origin of the Kenan model are described. New cooperative relationships among service providers are suggested in order for the model to work successfully. The last sections of the document cite test results and quotes parents and teachers about the success of the project, describe the mission of the National Center for Family Literacy, present a thank-you letter and poem written to project staff from a program graduate, and list the project's staff, adjunct training faculty, and advisory board. (CML)

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A Place to Start:
THE KENAN TRUST FAMILY LITERACY PROJECT

CED53 729

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PREFACE

Tom Kenan and I discovered family literacy education two years ago, on a memorable visit to a rural school house in Taylorsville, Kentucky. It was an unlikely journey we had taken, but a journey strongly recommended to us by Bill Bennett, then U.S. Secretary of Education. On a trip to Washington, Tom and I had met with Secretary Bennett and asked him a question: "Who is doing the most creative work today in the field of literacy?" He told us about Sharon Darling and the Parent and Child Education program in Kentucky.

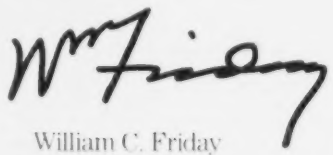
For both Tom and me, that day in Taylorsville was eye-opening: Parents, all of them dropouts, were eagerly learning to read and write; their preschool children were learning also. Then, in the afternoon, the parents and children were learning and playing together, discovering with each other the joy and the power of education.

I had been working in education for forty years, but nowhere had I seen one program that did so many things so well, that addressed such a broad range of needs so effectively. It got to the heart of the literacy problem, the intergenerational cycle that perpetuates illiteracy, and its stubborn companion—poverty. Soon after that visit, the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project was born.

This fall, the Kenan Project begins its second year of operation. What began with seven sites in North Carolina and Kentucky will soon be up and running in twenty-nine sites in eleven states. And in order to keep up with the avalanche of requests for information and assistance, the Kenan Trust has recently expanded the Project's staff and transformed its Louisville headquarters into the National Center for Family Literacy.

This booklet is our attempt to define the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project for educators, public officials, and other concerned citizens: What is family literacy and why is it so important? How has the Kenan Project begun to address the need for family literacy? What has the Project accomplished thus far, and what does it hope to accomplish in the years to come?

The Kenan Trust hopes someday to look back on the visit to Taylorsville as a significant beginning, the beginning of a national movement to break the intergenerational chains of illiteracy. In the words of Natalie, one of the Project's inspiring participants, the family literacy program has proven itself, at the very least, "a place to start."



William C. Friday
Executive Director
William R. Kenan, Jr.
Charitable Trust

INTRODUCTION: Natalie's Story

Natalie's eyes told her story. When she entered the Kenan program with her four-year-old son, B.J., they were fixed on the ground, hidden under her long red hair. She answered questions reluctantly. Her shyness approached paralysis.

Teachers soon discovered the sadness Natalie was hiding. Her parents, divorced when she was young, had swapped her back and forth in a series of custody disputes—with layovers in foster homes. Natalie had dropped out of school after finishing the 10th grade—the same place her father had stopped. Her mother left school after the 9th grade.

Now 30, Natalie has four children, two by a former husband, two by a boyfriend who is addicted to drugs and alcohol. She has never had a regular job and lives on public assistance.

But the Kenan teachers soon discovered something else about Natalie: She is unusually bright. And, after a year in the Kenan program, she has passed the General Equivalency Diploma exams—with a perfect score in literature—and is preparing to apply to a college-level accounting program.

Her eyes are alert and vibrant. She smiles and laughs easily.

"When I was in high school, things were going on at home that made me hate it," she says. "Sometimes I would be out all night with my mother, and at school they would put me in a room and let me sleep. I never knew when she was going to appear at school and embarrass me. I was bashful and never able to say what I thought or felt."

Natalie was referred to the Kenan Project by her county's housing authority, but she was reluctant to sign up at first. School was a nest of bad memories for her, and it took several visits from project staff to gain her trust. Today she says: "I probably wouldn't have come if B.J.

hadn't been included. Knowing he was next door, I didn't feel bad leaving him while I did something for me."

Once she joined the program, Natalie formed a close bond with the other fifteen men and women in the program—and with their toddlers. In fact, she became the group's leader

and top achiever. Instead of the little girl whose mother embarrassed her, she was a woman whom friends admired.

"It was like getting the sisters you never had. I almost quit coming three times, but they just wouldn't let me. I was in shock that they cared that much."

During the program, Natalie was most affected by a poet who visited the class occasionally during the "parenting education" period. She read "Beauty and the Beast" and talked to the class about poetry and art and writing down one's inner thoughts. She was unlike anyone Natalie had ever met.

"I had thought authors and poets were like movie stars; you just hear about them," Natalie says today. "But I listened to her and watched her and slowly took her off a pedestal. I could relate to her and talk with her just like you can real people."

Soon, Natalie was keeping a journal and writing poetry of her own.

Natalie's son B.J. has changed too. B.J. entered the program a rebellious, aggressive loner. He kicked the teachers, mimicking his own father's treatment of him. And he stood apart from the other children.

"He wouldn't play with other people, or get into games," Natalie recalls. "Now he wants to take the lead. Not just join in, take the lead. At home, when we started, everything was always given to him because he was 'the baby.' Now he takes turns and doesn't mind sharing, because he has something to share. He teaches me a lot."

Although Natalie read to B.J. occasionally before beginning the program, reading has now become a regular part of their family life. She keeps the bookcase stocked with books and other learning materials.

"I thought that children didn't learn until they started kindergarten, so that's when you started trying to teach them. Now I know ways to help him learn. It's not like teaching, it's more like playing. I learned to be a teacher for him."

Natalie's older children have felt the difference in her as well. "Now all my children ask me to help them with their homework, and I really enjoy that. You might not think that fifth grade math is that hard, but I wouldn't have been able to help with that before. Now I can help them with anything, and it has shown in their report cards. My fifth grader failed first grade, and he's always been behind. This year, in one grade period he had a 99 average in reading, a 94 average in math, and a 93 average in spelling.

"It has helped me in my work to be able to help them. I get more confident, and that shows in them and they get more confident."

Natalie's most difficult challenge lies ahead. She has not broken off the relationship with her boyfriend, who is still in the grip of alcohol and drugs. But, with the help of a therapist to whom she was referred by the program, Natalie has come to understand the abusive nature of the relationship.

More than anything, Natalie says, the program has given her courage. "I used to have lots of self-doubt. At the grocery store, if I got something that I found was ruined when I got home, I would think that was just me! Now I'll take it back. I'll complain a little. The courage means the most to me, because I know it will rub off on my children. They won't grow up being like me—or like I was being."

The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Program: Making Parent and Child Partners For Success

Call them America's "disappeared." They are the millions of young American parents, parents like Natalie, who have dropped out of school and now find themselves ill-equipped to survive and prosper in our increasingly complex society.

Partly literate, partly skilled, home bound, poor, often abandoned by spouses and without friends, run ragged by their children, they live without hope. Their ambitions—for themselves and their children—are confined within the walls of their tattered homes, imprisoned by their own bleak histories.

In their isolation, these mothers and fathers begin "programming" their children for failure at an early age. They are unfamiliar with the ways in which parents can nurture an interest in learning; often, indeed, they find their children's education threatening—a reminder of their own failures, a wedge driving their children away from them. In a thousand small ways, these disappeared parents instill in their children a belief that education is not valuable, that it is not for them. Early on, these children begin to think that they are not cut out for the mainstream.

Call it a birthright of underachievement, passed along from one generation to the next.

The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project was launched two years ago as an experiment to break this cycle of dependency and despair. The Project, run by the National Center for Family Literacy in Louisville, Kentucky, is based on an innovative and unique program model—a model that focuses on family as the critical context in which learning is stimulated, or stifled.

In the Kenan model, undereducated parents and their preschool children go to school together: the parent for adult literacy and prevocational training, the child for early childhood development classes, and both together for classes on how to create in the home an atmosphere that supports learning.

It's a simple formula, and it works. To date, more than 300 adults and children have participated in the program at seven pilot sites in North Carolina and Kentucky. Twenty-two additional pilot projects in eleven states are now being planned. And the Kenan Project office has been flooded with inquiries, thousands of them, from educators and policy-makers across the country.

LITERACY AND THE NEW ECONOMY

The reason for this widespread attention is not mysterious. As our nation approaches the 1990s and the century beyond, enhancing the literacy skills of disadvantaged citizens is an emerging imperative—not just a socially desirable goal, but an economic necessity. Twenty-five years from now, the baby-boom generation will begin reaching retirement age. It will then be left to today's declining pool of young workers—an increasing proportion from poor and minority backgrounds—to drive the economy and create the wealth necessary to maintain America's prosperity and support the rest of us in our retirement.

As it evolves, our economy is requiring dramatically higher levels of literacy in the workplace. In 1967, more than 40 percent of all jobs in America were held by workers who had not graduated high school. By 1987, that figure had dropped below 15 percent.

And the trend is expected to continue—even to accelerate—in the years to come. According to the Hudson Institute's 1987 report, *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century*, high-skill jobs made up 24 percent of existing jobs in 1985, but they will comprise 41 percent of all new jobs created from 1985 to the year 2000. By contrast, low-skill jobs made up 40 percent of existing jobs in 1985, but only 27 percent of projected new jobs.

Without higher levels of literacy and numeracy, millions of workers will not be able

to master the new tasks and technologies that the future workplace will require. For those who miss the train, who fail to master the basics and earn their diplomas, catching up will require a harder and harder sprint.

And it is not just individuals who are in jeopardy: If the U.S. workforce cannot handle the more complex jobs being created in the economy, these jobs will move overseas. They will move to industrialized nations in Europe and the Far East where public schools do a better job of educating the less affluent half of the society—just as low-wage manufacturing jobs continue to move to countries in the Third World.

Thus, to a large extent, the country's economic future hinges on the ability of young adults, particularly undereducated adults, to develop skills and become productive workers; and it hinges on the choice of their children to stay in school and develop ever more advanced skills to meet the demands of an economy and a society in the midst of continuing technological revolution.

The challenge is clear. And equally clear are the educational and demographic data which suggest that the U.S. will fail to meet the challenge unless new strategies are developed and implemented.

- Of 171 million Americans 18 years and older, 51.8 million lack a high school diploma and 29.2 million have less than nine years of schooling, according to the 1980 Census.
- After a decade of educational "reform," the dropout rate is not improving significantly. It has held stubbornly at roughly 30 percent throughout the 1980s.
- The number of children living in poverty has grown by 50 percent in the past 15 years. One-fourth of the children who entered the first grade in 1986 were living in impoverished families.
- The achievement gap between races is not closing. The typical black 17-year-old reads at the same level as the typical white 13-year-old.
- And, increasingly, babies are being raised by babies themselves. Every day, 1,500 teenagers give birth. Of those, 500 have not completed high school, and 100 have not completed the ninth grade.

All the while, our information age, internationalized, high-tech economy marches forward.

THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

As the squeeze for skilled labor intensifies, federal and state policymakers are searching for new ways to provide the undereducated with a second start—to bring the "disappeared" back into the light.

Preschool programs are on the agendas of the Congress and most state legislatures. Bills for publicly subsidized daycare are being debated in the halls of Congress. School reform, a persistent theme since the early 1980s, continues to sweep through states and local school districts. And states are studying ways to provide welfare recipients with the education and training mandated by the 1988 Family Support Act.

These efforts are promising. But a smorgasbord of isolated programs will not break the cycle of undereducation. To bring about fundamental change, programs must be integrated to address all of the varied but interrelated needs of the disadvantaged family. This is the essence of the Kenan family literacy model.

"Breaking the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy means a lot more than improving literacy skills of adults and children," says Sharon Darling, director of the National Center for Family Literacy and founder of the Kenan Project. "It means changing attitudes, values, and in some cases cultures."

That conclusion is shared by First Lady Barbara Bush. After many years supporting and working with a wide range of literacy initiatives nationwide, Mrs. Bush explained recently that "It became clear to me that we must attack the problem of a more literate America through the family." Early in 1989 she established The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, and she asked Sharon Darling of the Kenan Project to serve as a charter member of the Foundation's Board of Directors.

UNDERSTANDING THE CYCLE

Research has long supported the notion that the family is the vital foundation upon which a child's enthusiasm and capacity for learning grows—or doesn't grow. Parents, and particularly mothers, have a powerful influence on a child's attitude toward learning. And it is now clearly established that a child's most important intellectual and emotional growth occurs before kindergarten. By the time disadvantaged children reach school, they may already be two years behind their classmates.

Meanwhile, teachers find that parental involvement—in school activities, in homework, in encouraging education within the home—is vital for children once they are in school. A 1988 study, *The Condition of Teaching*, reported that 90 percent of surveyed teachers feel that problems in education are due, in substantial part, to a lack of parental support.

Across America, a growing number of parents—parents at the lowest end of the literacy continuum—may hear that message but feel unable to respond. These parents do not know the joy of reading to their children, and their children do not reap the documented benefits of being read to.

Intimidated by school, these parents often do not involve themselves in their children's education. Notes and report cards from school may go unread, and little encouragement is provided for children to do their homework. When they are asked to help with schoolwork, these parents are likely to push their children away—lacking the confidence that they can do it, unwilling to risk the embarrassment of failing. Often without a job, a spouse, or a support network of close friends and relatives, these disappeared parents are likely to feel cut off, boxed in, devalued. Under this strain, many can't provide the emotional and economic support their children need.

Slowly, the children's enthusiasm for learning is throttled, and they begin to look for satisfaction outside of school. They become sexually active at a tender age; they have children before they're emotionally ready; they drop out, ready to begin the cycle anew.

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THE KENAN MODEL: A Day In School Together

The Kenan family literacy model departs from these traditional programs in at least three ways:

- It treats the family as a whole instead of addressing each individual separately.
- It addresses the broad spectrum of a parent's needs—as a confident individual, as a future employee, and as a nurturing parent; and
- Instruction and teacher training are intensive. Classes meet three days a week, all day, for the entire school year. (Most adult literacy classes meet two evenings a week for a couple of hours.) And Kenan teachers undergo an eight-day training session each year—far more training than is offered in typical literacy or preschool programs.

A day in the Kenan program begins like an ordinary school day—with the arrival of a school bus and a free ride for parent and child to school. After breakfast together in the cafeteria, parents and children go to separate but neighboring classrooms.

Under the supervision of an adult education teacher, the parents work for three hours on basic academic skills—reading, math, and oral and written communication, all with an emphasis on critical thinking. The program also has a prevocational skills component to help the parents explore career options and job opportunities, practice goal-setting, and master some very practical techniques for resume writing and interviewing. Because skills and abilities within the groups vary widely, much

of the academic instruction is individualized. However, the curriculum also focuses heavily on interactive learning: The teachers facilitate frequent group discussion, peer interaction, and small group problem-solving sessions as well.

During the same three-hour period, the children are developing their pre-literacy skills—oral communication, social interaction, and language development—overseen by an early childhood specialist trained to deliver the "High Scope" curriculum which has proven most effective in early childhood programs throughout the nation.

Afterwards, parents and children come together for "Parents as Teachers Time," a

45-minute period of joint activities. During this period, children are the leaders, initiating projects in which their parents can play along—drawing on an easel, for instance, or putting together a puzzle. In the second half of the period, the teacher demonstrates an activity that parents and children might enjoy at home—story-telling, for example, or making musical instruments out of household objects. Parents learn to teach through play.

Lunch follows, for parent and child together. And after lunch, while their children nap, the parents work as volunteers in the school, tutoring older children or working in the library or school office.

In the final period, while the children play outside, the parents meet with teachers for forty-five minutes of parenting education. This is a chance for them to discuss all the problems and questions they have as parents—such as discipline or nutrition or cleanliness or domestic conflict. It is also a chance to design activities or projects to foster learning in the home, or a chance to listen to guest speakers—poets and artists or specialists in alcoholism or child development.

Parents and children follow this routine from September through May. At the end of the school year, in a graduation ceremony, diplomas are handed out to parents and children, along with a $50 gift certificate to a school supply store. Parents can use the money to buy material for the children to play with during the summer.

How It Began: Origins of the Kenan Model

The Kenan Project's "family intervention" model was developed in 1985 under the direction of Sharon Darling, then the director of Adult Education for the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Called the Parent and Child Education program, or PACE, it was funded by the Kentucky legislature in 1986 and initiated in six rural counties. The following year, the legislature expanded the program to 18 rural counties.

PACE gained national attention in September 1988 when the Ford Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government named it one of ten outstanding innovations in state and local government. (The distinction carried with it a $100,000 prize.)

By that time, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust of Chapel Hill, N.C., had taken an interest in PACE. In January 1988, it provided a major grant to establish model family literacy programs at three sites in Louisville, Kentucky, and four counties in North Carolina.

For these Kenan projects, the original PACE model was modified slightly: More time was found each day for parents and children to be together; parents were required to volunteer at the schools; teacher training was extended; and a career education component was included in the adult literacy classes.

The Jefferson County School System was selected to administer the Kenan projects in Kentucky; in North Carolina, arrangements for joint administration were made between local school systems and state-funded community colleges.

SUPPORTING FAMILY LITERACY: A New Framework

Though simple in format, the Kentucky model requires state and local agencies to work together closely in new and unfamiliar ways. Community colleges, which oversee adult education programs in some states, including North Carolina, must work closely and share resources with local school systems and state departments of education who oversee and operate public schools. In other states, where adult literacy education is provided by separate departments within the public schools, uncommon cooperation is also required.

Adult literacy and early childhood instructors must learn to work as a team. Special training is required to acquaint them with each other's disciplines and with the dynamics common to disadvantaged families. Narrow specialists cannot do the job.

School administrators must learn to trust disadvantaged parents as volunteers and assign them meaningful tasks. That, too, may require special training.

Outreach and referral systems must be developed to recruit disadvantaged families and, once they enroll, to help address the many problems common to them. It may take several home visits from a teacher — or from another parent in the program — before parents will sign up.

For parents with special or acute problems, teachers must have access to a range of social services (alcohol treatment, shelter from physical abuse, health care, and psychological counseling). A family literacy program cannot address all these problems directly, but it can't ignore them either. A Kentucky program's teacher is often the first to be trusted with the truth of a family's situation.

Breaking The Old Pattern, Creating A New

One has only to listen to the voices and look at the faces of the parents and children to know that the Kenan model works. But there are some hard numbers, too.

Attendance itself is a measure of success, because school was a frightening, bitter experience for many parents. Attendance at the Kenan sites was 88 percent; in some sites it surpassed 95 percent.

For those families who participated in the program through graduation, scores on tests administered at the beginning and end of the school year showed considerable progress:

- 85 percent of the parents increased their academic aptitude scores by two or more grade levels (it passed the GED exam), and
- Children increased their developmental skills, a prerequisite to reading by 67 percent, as measured by tests prepared for the High Scope preschool curriculum.

The most dramatic effects are less easily measured. According to teachers, parents in the program learned faster than participants in other literacy programs. Instruction was tailored to each parent's needs and abilities, and what they were taught was put in a practical context. Researchers have found that "functional context" learning—learning in which the application of what's taught is readily understood—is far more effective in teaching adults than the traditional school approach—teaching abstract concepts in discrete curricular segments. By learning to read to their children, for example, the parents' desire to learn is whetted by their desire to use their new skills right away.

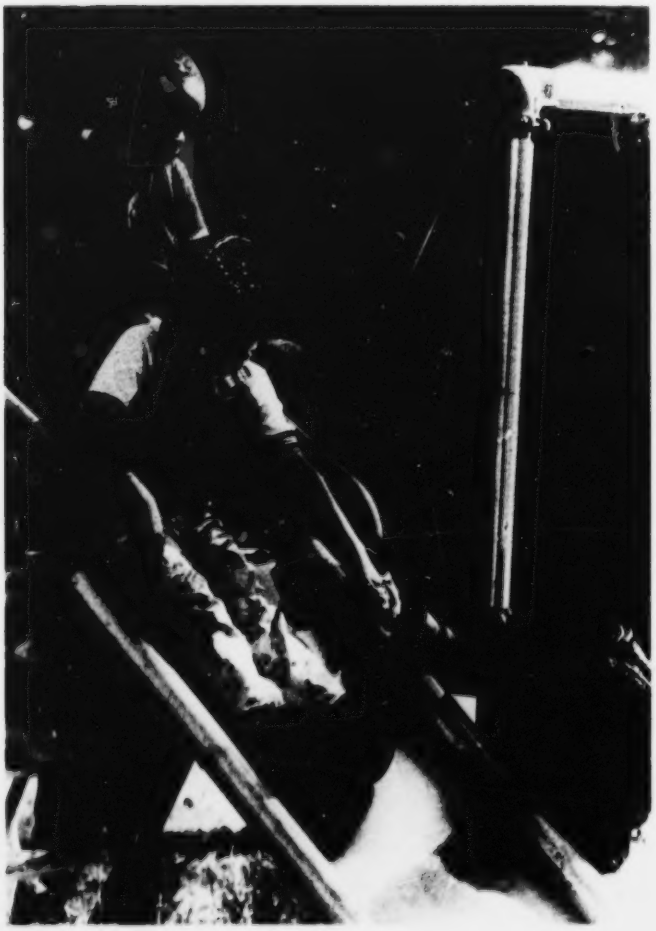
Parents also felt that the program left them better equipped to meet their children's emotional and educational needs, and that it helped them to create a closer bond with their children. Says one Kenan mother, "I used to think that if their clothes were clean and their teeth were brushed, everything was okay. I was leaving out the important parts. Now I'm a friend [and] a mother to them."

Perhaps most important, the program gave the disappeared parents a rare taste of accomplishment. Many developed the self-esteem

and the confidence they needed to set personal and career goals long deferred. One mother wrote in her daily journal, kept as a writing assignment: "I may have been a dropout, but I can't be a quitter all my life."

Another says: "Without this program, I would be sitting at home watching game shows or something. I tried going to fill out job applications, but I put down 9th grade for education level and that made me feel bad. I'll feel good now that I can put GED. If I hadn't come to this program, I wouldn't be going around with this big head."

Also, by doing volunteer work in the school, parents learned that the working world need not be a fearful place. (They also got practical help, such as job references.) Many parents remained involved in the school even after they left the program: Two were elected officers of the local PTA.



The program's impact was equally striking for the children. The preschoolers developed verbal and social skills that put them on an even footing with their peers as they enter kindergarten. They became more motivated and self sufficient, more eager to explore, and more interested in complex tasks. According to their parents, the children also became more open about their needs and feelings—and easier to manage at home.

Says one mother: "When we began, Kenny wouldn't do different things—just the same thing over and over. Now he plans ahead and makes all kinds of choices. When I work on my homework, he asks for paper and crayons to play with. When his brother tries to bother him, he tells him, 'Quit bothering me. I have to do my homework.'"

One father in the program explains: "The 'Parent as Teacher' class has taught my girls the difference between play and 'serious behavior.' That's spilled over to our home. They know how to work within schedules and routines at home, and that's made working at home much easier for me. The two girls used to be very dependent on each other. The class has made them more independent."

Like the problems of the disadvantaged family, the Kenan program's benefits are not isolated, but mutually reinforcing. To the extent that parents become engaged in learning, they come to see learning as valuable for their children also. Children become eager to learn when they see that learning is something their parents value; and the child's enthusiasm, in turn, motivates the parents further. The parent-child relationship becomes a partnership for success, rather than a crucible for failure.

Society is the ultimate beneficiary of family literacy. It gains productive, taxpaying, responsible citizens who can act as role models for other disappeared parents without jobs or skills or hope. And it gains children with the tools and the family support to confront an uncertain future—children who, without this help, are too often destined for lives of despair.

LOOKING AHEAD: Replicating The Kenan Project, Promoting Family Literacy

Because the pilot projects have been so successful, and because the Kenan program office has been deluged with requests—more than 5,000 from across the country—for information about the project and about family literacy, the Kenan Charitable Trust elected in April 1989 to broaden the scope of the project and to expand its staff. Three months later, the National Center for Family Literacy was established in Louisville, Kentucky, with the Kenan Trust providing funds to support the Center's first year of operations.

The mission of the new National Center will be to:

1. **Provide information, training, materials, and technical assistance to new and existing family literacy initiatives throughout the nation.**
2. **Promote public awareness of the cyclical problem of illiteracy by providing data and information to federal, state, and local policymakers and program planners.**
3. **Fund model programs and collect data to ensure that research informs practice, so that emerging family literacy programs can learn from the experience of their predecessors.**

In August 1989, the Center conducted its first training session to prepare teachers and coordinators to deliver the Kenan model program effectively. These teachers and coordinators represented each of the twenty-nine sites where the Kenan projects are being planned (the original seven, plus twenty-two new sites). These include sites in eleven states: Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Virginia.

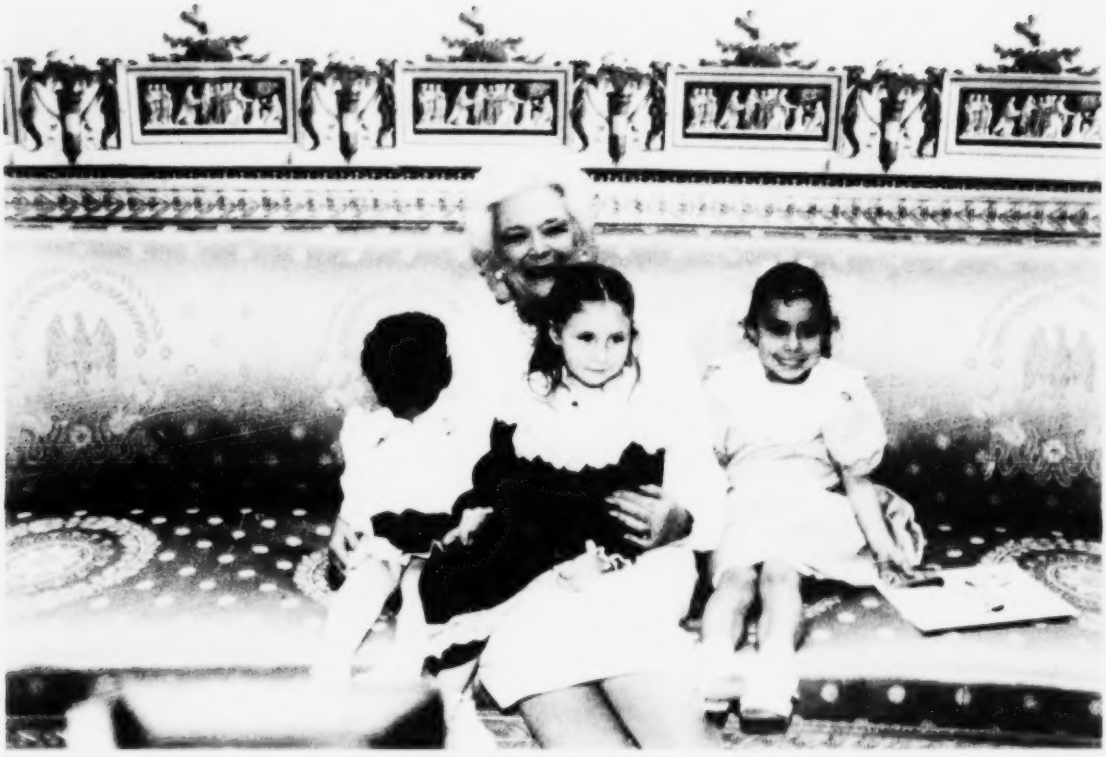
Mississippi First Lady, Mrs. Julie Mabus, who helped to arrange for a Kenan pilot project in the Hazlehurst, Miss., school district, described her state's interest in the Kenan Project this way:

"Breaking the cycle of undereducation is crucial in Mississippi because so much of our income is in the form of transfer payments. It goes to the heart of economic development.

"Child care and literacy are the two issues I've taken an interest in [as first lady]. When I learned that the Kenan program brings the two of them together, I was even more interested."

In order to guide its operations and enhance its visibility, the Center has recently established a distinguished National Advisory Board, including ranking members of the U.S. House and Senate, top executives and CEOs of major corporations, and leading educators and scholars on family policy issues.

This Board, combined with the success of the Kenan pilots and the intense interest they have generated nationwide, are testimony to the fact that family literacy is an idea whose time has come.



The brand new Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy is now spotlighting the intergenerational nature of illiteracy and preparing a book celebrating and describing innovative family literacy efforts across the U.S.

Congress, too, is taking an interest in extending educational opportunities to disadvantaged families. In 1988, Representative William Goodling (R-PA) pushed through the Even Start program, making grants available to local schools that organize family literacy programs. In the fall of 1989, the Department of Education will distribute the first $14 million in Even Start grants. The Family Support Act of 1988, the landmark welfare reform bill, will also provide a shot in the arm for family literacy.

Congressman Goodling, a member of the National Center for Family Literacy's Board of Advisors, recently offered this perspective on the emerging family literacy movement: "The Kenan program is the kind of private sector effort we need to combat and reduce illiteracy. But the problem is so large, it's beyond the means of any one sector to handle."

The Kenan Project and the National Center for Family Literacy provide, as Natalie explains, "a place to start" in the struggle to break the intergenerational cycle of the disadvantaged. If this struggle is to be won, it will be because policymakers, along with educators of both children and adults, come together and make quality family literacy programs a national priority in America.

The gift of literacy is a great one for both parents and children; it is a gift that we as a nation cannot afford not to give.

For Natalie, For Disappeared Parents Everywhere.

A Place To Start

In June 1989, days after she and her son B.J. walked down the aisle and grasped their diplomas, Natalie mailed a letter to Kenan project director Sharon Darling.

"For years I wanted to go back to school," she wrote, "but I always had plenty of excuses and reasons not to. I didn't know how or where to begin. I was afraid if I pursued my dream that my children might somehow be left behind, and then you placed a bridge that supported all of us, allowing us to dream together, learn together, and achieve together."

In addition to her kind letter, Natalie also composed a poem. Better than any prose, its words convey the promise and the possibility that the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project represents:

You Have Done Such a Wonderful Thing
Thank You Straight From My Heart

I always thought maybe someday
When the children are on their way
And all that must come first has gone
I can pursue a dream of my own

As time passed I became unsure of myself
My dream faded upon its shelf
Then you placed a bridge across all my doubts
And gave me the someday I used to dream about

One thing I have learned from the path behind
Is should I ever stumble I'll find
A supportive hand to steady me
Because I'm part of The Kenan Family

You have done such a wonderful thing
You have given me hope and courage to dream
My children see this and they believe
That they can also achieve

I searched for a card that could thank you enough
For what you have done for all of us
But store bought words just wouldn't do
So for all the dreams that are coming true

THANK YOU

Straight from my heart
For giving us a place to start

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